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THE CONGRESS BOOKS: No. 26

THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS



By S. R. P. MOULSDALE, B.D.

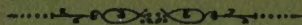
Principal of St. Chad's College,
Durham, Examining Chaplain to
the Bishop of Durham

THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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The Sacrifice of the Mass

IT is characteristic of modern loose thinking about doctrine, that the sacramental and sacrificial aspects of the Holy Eucharist should be placed in opposition, or regarded as exclusive of one another. In reality the Holy Eucharist is a sacrifice because it is a sacrament, and a sacrament because it is a sacrifice. For unless the doctrine of the Real Presence of the living Christ under the form of bread and wine in the Holy Communion is assumed, it will be vain to attempt to show that the Mass is a sacrifice. But if Jesus the great High Priest is really and truly present there, in his body and blood, his soul and his divinity, and the bread and wine, as Catholics believe, become the veritable body and blood of Christ, then the priest is there and the victim is there also. And where are both priest and victim, there must be the sacrifice. Yet the fruit of the sacrifice is in the act of communion. We receive not only his body and blood, but the body and blood as that of the victim slain, who is now 'alive for evermore.' Sacrament and sacrifice are one.

Much misunderstanding regarding the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharistic sacrifice arises from a lack of clear definition as to what constitutes a sacrifice. Taking as a provisional definition (which we shall find it necessary to expand later on) that sacrifice is 'an offering made by man to God,' we note at once that the universal existence of the idea of sacrifice points to its being a natural instinct of humanity. It is, moreover, a fundamental and noble instinct, by which interior devotion and self-surrender to God can be publicly and corporately expressed. 'The cases in which ancient peoples are found to have no sacrifice are to be explained as due either to degradation so serious as to paralyse religious practice, or to other adventitious causes, such as pantheistic beliefs that banish God from serious consideration (as in pure Buddhism), and recoils from corrupted forms of sacrifice leading to mistaken views of its real nature and meaning (as in Mohammedanism and Protestantism)' (Hall, *Dogmatic Theology, The Sacraments*, p. 149). So much has sacrifice been regarded as man's natural way of access to God, that many have thought that positive revelation came to the aid of the natural instinct of mankind, to guide it in this matter.

But whatever may have been the origin of sacrifice itself, our basis of discussion will naturally be found in the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant, which the revelation of God


in Christ was designed both to fulfil and to supplant. In the Jewish Levitical Code sacrifice generally is regarded as an offering, made as a means of access to God, in some sense vicarious, but nevertheless demanding a symbolical identification of the offerer with the thing offered, so as to exhibit his own self-oblation. It is this indissoluble connexion of sacrifice with self-sacrifice which appeals to the most profound depths of man's spiritual nature. For the life that is life indeed is measured by loss rather than by gain. (*St. Mark* viii. 35.)

Under the old dispensation the ends of sacrifice are set forth as threefold. There is first the acknowledgement of the dominion of God, and this seems to have been the significance of the 'whole burnt offering.' Then there is the idea of thanksgiving and gratitude, exhibited in the 'peace-offering.' These two ends appear to embody the most elementary aspects of sacrifice, the homage and self-oblation owed to God by his creatures. But sin is a complication, and with the growth of a sense of guilt the propitiatory element becomes prominent. This desire to placate an offended God exhibits itself in the 'sin-offering,' the vital feature of which is the shedding of the blood of the victim and the offering before God of the blood shed.

This threefold division follows the order of *Leviticus* (ch. i., ii., iii.), and is frequently

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recognized throughout Holy Scripture. It groups sacrifices with regard to their moral purpose. But in actual practice the order needs to be changed. First the barrier of sin is removed by propitiation; then the sacrifice of righteousness, or whole burnt offering, can be made to symbolize dedication; and last of all, as the crown of sacrifice comes the peace-offering, with the sacrificial feast upon the victim offered, typifying the identification of the offerer with the thing offered.

OW the sacrifice of our Lord upon the cross, his heavenly priesthood, and the abiding memorial of both upon the altars of the Church on earth, are one eternal, timeless whole. And therein all the ends of sacrifice are summed up and fulfilled. By the sacrificial death of Christ made once for all, and never capable of repetition, the barrier of sin is removed and access to God secured. By his heavenly pleading of the eternal sacrifice our peace-offering is presented to the Father. And by its Eucharistic counterpart on earth, and especially and essentially by the act of communion, our identification with our heavenly priest and victim is sealed and our self-dedication to God made possible. The sacrifice of the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the cross

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are not separate, and cannot be separated. They are the one, only, real sacrifice that the world has ever seen.

‘One offering, single and complete,’
With lips and heart we say;
But what he never can repeat,
He shows forth day by day.

So the Holy Eucharist is entirely dependent upon the sacrifice of the cross. It is in idea and essence one with it, though in action it is distinct from it.

But we should also notice that under the Old Covenant there was another class of sacrifices, the bloodless offerings of meal and wine. These were supplementary to, and dependent upon, the former class; they were a memorial thereof. So we are led to expect that under the New Covenant, which, like the Old, was not dedicated ‘without blood,’ we should have a bloodless offering supplementary to the sacrifice of Calvary, and that this should be of the nature of a memorial, as our Lord himself describes it when he says ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ or more literally ‘for my memorial.’ It is in the memorial sacrifice of the Eucharist that from the earliest days Christian writers have seen the fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachi, ‘From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be

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offered unto my name and a pure offering' (*Mal. i. 11*).¹

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews emphasizes the imperfection, the transitoriness, and the inadequacy of the sacrifices of the old law. They were no more than 'shadows,' albeit truthful shadows, 'of the good things to come.' These 'good things' have come: the sacrificial figures of the Old Testament ritual are fulfilled by the death and heavenly priesthood of Christ, and are taken up and exhibited in a new and living way in the Eucharist. The glorious reality surpasses immeasurably its shadowy types; for what they prefigured, that Christ's death and priesthood make effectual and the Eucharist represents before God on behalf of Christians, and (by the hidden operation of the Holy Spirit) applies to individuals.

The sacrifices of the Old Covenant were imperfect because they were only symbolic, and mere symbols cannot save; they were transitory, 'else would they not have ceased to be offered'; they were inadequate, because


¹ See, for instance, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (*Didache*), xiv. 'On the Lord's day come together, break bread and hold Eucharist, after confessing your transgressions that your sacrifice may be pure. But let none who has a quarrel with his fellow join in your meeting until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice be not defiled. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord, "In every place and time offer me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great king, saith the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the heathen."'

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the victim offered was of no intrinsic value in the sight of God, and it was 'not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins' (*Hebr. x. 4*). But in the sacrifice of Calvary, perpetuated in the Eucharist, there is the perfect priest and the perfect victim: it lives on eternally, in the abiding priesthood of our Lord in heaven, and in its Eucharistic counterpart on earth: and it is sufficient because, by the one oblation of himself once offered, Christ has made 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.'

All types are here fulfilled: our propitiation of God is made and access to him opened through 'the new and living way,' the sacred humanity of Christ, 'that is to say, his flesh'; our dedication to him is effected, and our identification and incorporation with him completed. The whole body of the faithful participates in his priesthood, and all Christian people may be associated with and joined to him as victim. So, and so only, can we have power to respond to the call of St. Paul, 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service' (*Rom. xii. 1*).

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T the outset we saw that the relation of the Eucharist to the sacrifice on the cross was one of substantial identification, since in both alike Jesus Christ our great High Priest is both the offerer and the victim. This is the vital meaning implied in the truth declared by him, that the consecrated bread and wine are his body and blood. Because they are these sacred and everliving verities when they are presented before God in the Holy Eucharist, that which is offered in the Eucharist and that which was offered on the cross is the same substantial and eternal thing. But the death on the cross was made once for all. It can never be repeated. Therefore the Eucharist is well described as a memorial before God of the death of Christ, a representative sacrifice. It is a propitiation in this sense, that it makes God propitious to those who contritely participate in offering it by placing before him his beloved Son, who, by dying for us once upon the cross, has become for every succeeding generation the sufficient propitiation for sin.

See, Father, thy beloved Son,
Whom here we now present to thee ;
The all-sufficient sacrifice,
The sinner's one and only plea.

Many modern theologians have been at pains to emphasize the idea of the destruction,

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in sacrifice, of the victim offered ; and various theories have been advanced to show how this 'destruction' is accomplished in the Holy Eucharist. One such theory is that of Vasquez, who has been followed by many. He states that the consecration of the separate species constitutes a mystical separation of the body from the blood, which makes death : that is, the living body and blood of Christ are exhibited in a manner that bears unmistakable witness to his having died for us. Lugo sees the essential idea of 'destruction' in the condescension and 'self-emptying' which our Lord undergoes in placing himself under the sacramental species.

But such refined theories lack Catholic consent, and hardly seem to touch the real heart of the matter. Later writers are inclined to abandon these theories, and to insist that the root idea of sacrifice lies in offering, handing over, and consecrating the gift to God. Such a sacrifice, while it presupposes death, and regards death as of the essence of sacrifice, finds its inner meaning in the offering of a life, the surrender of the will and of the whole self to God. For sinners such sacrifice involves blood-shedding, because 'it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life,' and 'without shedding of blood there is no remission.' By death the very life of the victim is removed to another sphere of existence, where our Lord as High Priest for ever makes

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continuous intercession for us. And what takes place in heaven continuously, is reproduced on earth perpetually, daily, and hourly on thousands of altars.

Under the Old Law there was a double substitution. The victim was substituted for the offerer; and the priest was also, under another aspect, a substitute for the offerer, as he presented the victim. But it is an element in the perfection of the sacrifice of Christ that priest and victim are one and the same, and that not by substitution but by identification. For mere substitution cannot save. And so it comes to pass that the true end of sacrifice is achieved in the Eucharist, inasmuch as it affords to each individual the method and opportunity, by his incorporation 'in Christ,' of offering his very self to God in union with the 'one, true, pure, immortal sacrifice.' And so we sing:

Look, Father, look on his anointed face,
And only look on us as found in him.

The true end of the Eucharist is that of all sacrifice; not merely to bring Christ down from heaven, but to exalt mankind, in him and with him, to the very heart and being of God himself, which is man's true bourne and destiny.

Corruptio optimi pessima—the better the object, the worse its abuse—and this maxim is well exemplified by the existence, in later

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mediaeval times, of certain perverted notions of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharistic sacrifice, which are strongly repudiated in the Thirty-first Article of the Church of England. Such ideas, as the Article is careful to state, arose from popular misconceptions ('*vulgo dicebatur*'), rather than from the opinions of reputable theologians. The strictures of the Article are rightly directed against the vulgar and heretical doctrine of the renewal and repetition in the Eucharist of the actual death of Christ—the idea that he is slain afresh at every celebration of the Mass—and not against the doctrine of the Christian sacrifice as understood by the Fathers, and in an orthodox sense. Any teaching which is contrary to the first clause of that Article, or inconsistent with the firm belief that there is but one real, true, and proper sacrifice, namely the offering which the incarnate Son of God made of himself upon the cross to the eternal Father, falls under the condemnation; for it is equivalent to an assertion that the first act of sacrifice was insufficient.

We Catholics know but one sacrifice. But its all-sufficient merits live on, as in our Lord's perpetual presentation of himself in heaven, so also in our Eucharistic oblation of his body and blood sacramentally present upon our altars. 'Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him' (*Rom. vi. 9*). Therefore we must

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reject any idea that the sacrifice of the Mass is calculated to supply some want or defect in the sacrifice of the cross, or that it is absolutely or independently propitiatory in itself. The Eucharist makes God propitious to those who participate in offering it, because their so doing is the identification of themselves, in Christ's chosen way, with his offering of the one sufficient sacrifice for sin, and the expression of that formal homage and self-oblation to God which is obligatory upon all rational creatures, and is made possible to fulfil effectively and acceptably in the Mass by virtue of its relation to the Cross. Because Christ is acceptable to the Father, we also are 'accepted in the beloved.'

WHAT then are the implications of the doctrine of the Eucharistic sacrifice? First of all it is the foundation and basis of all distinctively Christian prayer. We acquire the right to pray by union with Christ, and we exercise it by pleading his merits. Our prayers are heard by virtue of our membership in Christ, and only so far as they are united with the heavenly intercession of our great High Priest and his sacrifice. The Mass is the fundamental way, beyond all other ways, of 'asking in his name.'

Then the Mass is the great and characteristic act of Christian worship, and, except for im-

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poverished modern forms of Christianity, it has been thus regarded by all Christendom from the beginning. It transforms the Sabbath into Sunday, and is an essential element in our obligation to observe the Lord's day. The Hebrews kept the days of the week as days of Creation, and rested from their work on the seventh day: but Christians keep the days of Redemption, and no day is marked for cessation of activity in the Christian week. We have six days for work and one day for worship. Sunday is the day of resurrection, of renewal in Christ, of sacrificial worship and approach to the Father through and with the Son. Without our fulfilment of the obligation to take part in the holy sacrifice our Sunday worship is incomplete; for 'this our bounden duty and service' has not been rendered.

And it is our sacrifice of thanksgiving. Its dominant note is joy and gladness. From this it takes its apostolic title Eucharist. All the rejoicing of the Christian Church circles round it. Her stately cathedrals were built to be the shrines of the Real Presence, and to vent the loud cry of the Church's exultation that the tabernacle of God was with men. Her most stately ceremonial, her most glorious hymnody, her most magnificent vestments, have always been devoted to the honour of her Lord and King in the Blessed Sacrament. It is the glory of the Anglo-Catholic Movement that it has done much to restore to the Church of England

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that holy gladness which had been lost from her worship.

It is the Eucharist which gathers around itself the joy of the Christian life which springs from the sense of deliverance from sin and union with God. Thereat we are 'no longer strangers and pilgrims, but fellow-citizens with the saints and the whole household of God.' By the new and living way we pass through the veil, and come to the heavenly Jerusalem which is above, and free, and mother of us all; to the innumerable company of the angels, with their anthem 'Holy, Holy, Holy'; to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, and the blood of sprinkling, voicing no cry for vengeance, like that of Abel, but pleading for our pardon and protection.

It is in this fullness of joy at the great sacrifice of Christ that the Church sends up her triumphal and glorious paean to her God: 'We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee. . . . For thou only art holy; thou only art the Lord.'



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